

Katherine Guerra

Libby Saxton, Lisa Downing: Film and Ethics. Foreclosed Encounters

2011

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2011.1.312>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Guerra, Katherine: Libby Saxton, Lisa Downing: Film and Ethics. Foreclosed Encounters. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 28 (2011), Nr. 1, S. 113–116. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2011.1.312>.

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Libby Saxton, Lisa Downing: Film and Ethics. Foreclosed Encounters

London, New York: Routledge 2010, 175 S., ISBN 978-0-415-40927-8, GBP 19.99

Libby Saxton and Lisa Downing's *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* seeks to conduct a cutting edge analysis of the moving image and its implications as a potentially ethical or unethical agent. Less interested in qualitative evaluations of the many and varied films with which it engages, *Film and Ethics* analyzes films in terms of the ethical questions each raises. While films that deal with issues of morality may constitute entire genres, critical discourses which evaluate films using an ethical framework are only just beginning to come into their own. Saxton and Downing's work provides a fascinating insight into the negative and positive ethical promise of the moving image.

Film and Ethics is divided into two halves, the first, entitled "Representation and Spectatorship" and the second, "Theory, Ethics, and Film." The first section eases the reader into the frame of mind necessary for the task at hand, namely, approaching film analysis in a different way, based on questions of ethical significance rather than technical or narrative success. Each chapter opens with a brief discussion of past work by important ethical theorists, before the author moves on to perform in-depth scene, character, or narrative analyses of films which demonstrate the ethical theories in question. This marriage between ethical theory

and film analysis is made all the more accessible and exciting through Saxton and Libby's ever-present enthusiasm for their subjects.

Particularly interesting among the film analyses which comprise the first half of *Ethics* and which cover such films as *Ordet* (1955), *Cache* (2005), *Bamako* (2006), and *The Constant Gardener* (2005), is Lisa Downing's discussion of Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* (1991) as a potential vehicle for positive or negative representations of women. Downing analyzes the way the most basic technical traditions in film can sabotage any attempt at creating a positive representation within the narrative, "Thelma's and Louise's sublime plunge should mean annihilation, but it is cleverly turned into a celebration of freedom by cinematic means." (S.42) This revisionist approach to *Thelma and Louise* is representative of the other film analyses present in *Film and Ethics*, with both beloved and derided films finding new life as texts with ethical import. Unfortunately, the second half of *Film and Ethics* begins to lose some of the flair characterizing the first half.

"Theory, Ethics, and Film" is the title of the work's second section, and this loaded and infinitely broad title bespeaks the loss of intimacy and immediacy which is to come. It is in this more ethical theory-heavy second half in which *Film and Ethics* begins to feel more interested in engaging the reader in an ethical discourse, rather than one dedicated to fostering a blended discussion of both the implications of the moving image and ethical theory. For example, in one chapter the author misses the opportunity to mine her subjects, Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and the work of Emmanuel Levinas, for rich and heavily imbricated material, and instead unnecessarily complicates ideas which were better expressed earlier in other chapters.

In trying to fully flesh out the intricacies of ethical discourse, the authors have a tendency to get lost in the questions at hand, while neglecting the focus of a given chapter. For example, instead of creating a streamlined thesis on Levinas' presence in *Shoah*, Libby Saxton gets bogged down in rehashing his theories which were expressed much more cogently earlier in *Film*. So too, goes most of the second half of *Film and Ethics*, which rather than opening the discussion to cover even more interesting films such as those of Lars von Trier or Michael Haneke, westerns, or horror films, engages in a narrowly ethical dialogue that neglects films which would yield an even richer discussion.

Film and Ethics is a noteworthy contribution to the growing field of academic works dealing with the ethical implications of the moving image and perception. It is disappointing then, that it should prove to be so uniformly interesting, only to neglect to expand the field of films discussed. The integration of ethical criticism and film analysis performed by Saxton and Downing signals the growing presence of a potentially renewing methodology of film criticism and is innovative enough to appeal to the most well-versed veteran film scholar.

Katherine Guerra (Berkeley)